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AUTHOR Brittain, Mary M.; Brittain, Clay V.
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ABSTRACT

Methods of assessing the reading needs of college students can be examined in relation to two broad categories of college reading programs: (1) the self-contained course or sequence of courses in reading and study skills, and (2) courses or programs in which instruction in reading and study skills is interwoven with supplementary instruction in a content area. The identification of students for required instruction in self-contained courses is overwhelmingly dependent upon standardized test scores. In practice, survey tests, frequently the Nelson Denny Reading Test, are used more often than diagnostic examinations. Researchers disagree on the importance of diagnostic tests and what form they should take. Reading programs interwoven with content area instruction seem to make little use of standardized tests for assessment. Examination of two of these programs reveals more flexible and individual instruction. Although the survey reveals that colleges do rely heavily upon standardized tests for assessment, notable exceptions to this approach reflect theoretical and philsophical orientations that require a more incisive and holistic view of the reader than standardized tests currently provide. (JL)

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Means of Assessing Remedial Reading Needs of College Students

Mary M. Brittain
Virginia Commonwealth University

Clay V. Brittain
U.S. Army Training Support Center

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Reading improvement programs have long been a part of the American college scene, if a modest part.

Historically, however, it was assumed that most students entering American institutions of higher education were sufficiently proficient in reading to be able to meet the demands of college. The admission/selection process did much to assure that college students could read well enough for academic success. Those who could not were generally weeded out through attrition. After World War II this situation, which had prevailed historically, began to change. Government benefits extended to returning veterans brought into American colleges many students that otherwise would not have pursued higher education. The change accelerated markedly in the 1960's. This was a period of rapid expansion of community colleges. Also, most universities and four-year colleges liberalized their admission criteria, many adopting, in effect, open admission policies. The number of enrollments from open admissions are reported to have increased from about 700,000 in 1965 to over 3,000,000 in 1972. (New York Times, November 10, 1974)

For many of these students there was strong likelihood that the "open door" would become a "revolving door" (Rouche and Snow, 1977), with college exit following close on the heels of college entrance. Remedial programs offered by colleges proliferated, not only in reading, but in other areas as well. In a 1975 survey of a representative national sample of 100 four-year colleges and universities, Schantz found that seventy-two of the eighty-eight institutions responding, or eighty percent, had remedial reading programs. Of a sample of fifty community

colleges in the survey, forty-five responded and all but one had a remedial reading program. Other surveys have shown similar trends. The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that from the fall of 1979 to the fall of 1980 the total number of courses offered by 370 colleges and universities increased by fifteen percent, but the total number of remedial courses increased by twenty-two percent. It may be of interest to note that corrective and remedial courses in reading per se increased less than did other remedial courses.

There appears to be great variety in college remedial programs. To some extent, this variation may be a matter of nomenclature. Wassman (1977), for example, in a study of reading programs in ninety-seven California colleges, found that there were twenty-nine different course titles used to describe a "basic reading" course and twenty-four used to describe a "developmental" course. Jackson (1978) found that, course titles notwithstanding, there was a great deal of commonality in college reading instruction. Based upon the analysis of the responses of 105 predominantly four-year colleges, Jackson found that the following elements were emphasized in at least three-fourths of the programs: contextual analysis, finding main ideas, making inferences, drawing conclusions, test taking and notetaking.

Despite the variability in titles for similar courses and despite the similar emphases across courses, substantive differences in college reading instruction are evident. Some programs give credit and some do not. Some are required courses and some are not. Some are add-ons to the regular college curriculum; some involve restructuring of the curriculum. Some are integrated with content area courses while others

operate independently. Most combine reading and study skills but some do not. Some provide counseling and tutorial services, while others offer reading instruction only. Some rely heavily on the use of standardized tests while others emphasize informal assessment.

It is this last mentioned aspect of college reading instruction, assessment, that we wish to explore in this paper. What are the different methods of assessing the needs of college students for reading instruction? How does one get to know the student population to be served by a college reading program? How are their reading (and reading related) competencies and deficits assess?

The question, whatever the specific phrasing, needs to be addressed in two stages. At the first level, the question pertains to what might be regarded as a gate-triggering mechanism, i.e. the identification of candidates for college reading/study skills instruction. How, and on what basis, is the selection made? At the second level, the question pertains to diagnostic information for use in fashioning instruction. How much and what kinds of diagnostic information are felt to be necessary?

Chaplin (1977) has categorized college reading programs according to their theoretical orientation. In a survey of procedures, practices and principles in 118 college reading programs, schools identified their philosophical orientation as primarily behavioral, psychological, or psycholinguistic. The behavioral (or Skinnerian stimulus-response) theoretical base refers to programs which rely heavily on resources or equipment, such as programmed materials, which provide immediate reinforcement for skill achievement. In contrast to the early 1960's, during

which reading machines and programmed materials were widely used, fewer than 20 percent of Chaplin's respondents identified their theoretical base as behavioral.

The psychological theoretical model is patterned on the thinking of Piaget and undergirds programs focused "on cognitive development generally and reasoning ability in reading specifically." (p. 273) About one-third of the institutions surveyed espoused the Piagetian theoretical base, gearing their programs to the total cognitive and affective development of students "based on individual capabilities and experience backgrounds." (p. 273)

The third or psycholinguistic (language development) model is based on the theory of Kenneth Goodman. Programs claiming this philosophical base encompass all areas of language, linking reading instruction to listening, speaking and writing.

It would seem reasonable to suppose that the philosophical orientation of a program would be reflected in the assessment procedures used. Chaplin did not address this question in her survey. However, she did deduce from earlier surveys that the number of programs whose theoretical orientation was behavioral had declined. She also noted a decline in the percentage of programs using standardized reading tests for diagnosis. It seems to us that these parellel trends may be more than coincidental.

Numerous descriptions of college reading programs have appeared in the literature over the past two decades. These program descriptions generally do not lend themselves to classification in terms of theoretical-philosophical categories, such as those of Chaplin. But on a more descriptive level the programs can be grouped into two major types:

1. The self-contained course or sequence of courses in reading and study skills.
2. Courses or programs in which instruction in reading and study skills is interwoven with supplementary instruction in a content area.

This typology has important implications for our analysis. Methods of assessing reading needs of college students will be examined in relation to these two broad categories of college reading programs.

Self-Contained Courses and Course Sequences

It is the self-contained courses and courses sequences which have been most extensively covered in the college reading literature, especially reports of surveys, over the past two decades. These courses generally are offered for academic credit and may be elective for some students and required for others. The identification of students for required instruction in overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, dependent upon standardized test scores. In a survey of traditionally black colleges and their white counterparts, Joplin (1981) found that 80 percent of the black colleges and 61 percent of white colleges reported that tests were primary methods used for the placement of students in the reading program. The test most frequently used was the Nelson Denny Reading Test, which was used in 37 percent of the black colleges and 22 percent of the white colleges. The College Aptitude Test (CAT) was used in 19 percent of the black colleges. Other tests used in screening students for reading programs included the American College Testing

Program (ACT), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Stanford Achievement Test, Iowa Silent Reading Test, McGraw Hill Reading Test, California Test of Basic Skills, and the Diagnostic Reading Test.

Although assessment for placement of students in college reading programs and assessment for diagnosis have been phrased separately here, this separation may not hold true in actual practice. Not uncommonly, the only test given to students is a reading survey test, frequently the Nelson Denny Reading Test, which gives a reading level score but little additional diagnostic information. There are differences of opinion about the value of diagnostic test information in the teaching of college reading. Flippo (1979) has argued for the value of diagnostic test information as a basis for prescribing instruction in college reading programs and has deplored the dearth of studies which compare the effectiveness of instruction based upon diagnostic test information and instruction based upon a survey test such as the Nelson Denny. Flippo reports that a comprehensive review of the research literature for the period 1935-1978 revealed only two such studies.

In a study of her own, Flippo compared the achievement of students receiving instruction under differing levels of diagnostic information. In the experimental treatment, individual prescriptions were written for students based upon their performance on the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test. In the control treatment, subtest scores from the Nelson Denny Reading Test were the basis of individual prescriptions. In their pretest to posttest gains on the Nelson Denny, the experimental and control groups did not differ. However, in the subskills from the Stanford Diagnostic there were significant differences in literal

comprehension, word meaning, phonetic analysis, and scanning and skimming in favor of the experimental group. Flippo concluded that diagnostic reading tests should be administered to students in college reading programs and cautioned that survey tests should not be used alone to evaluate progress, since they may not reveal growth in reading subskills.

Pufahl (1980) argues that diagnostic test information tends to have a dampening effect on college developmental reading instruction. He advocates the use of the student's own responses to reading selections as a means of diagnosis. Pufahl's assessment procedures would seem to flow directly from his Piagetian view of reading as "a way to gain knowledge of and insight into themselves and the world around them." (p. 139)

In a recent paper that is highly critical of reading tests, Cole (1982) attacks what he sees as overdependence of instructional programs on testing. Cole faults reading tests mainly on the basis of their obsolescence; i.e., the tests reflect an outmoded view of reading as a conglomerate of subskills.

Evidence that diagnostic assessment of reading for college instruction need not depend on standardized tests is offered by Heinrichs (1981). She describes a one semester course for academically capable but low achieving freshmen at Westminister College, a small selective private college. Many of these students appeared to be fluent readers who nevertheless had negative attitudes and anxiety about reading and had difficulties in comprehension. In assessing student profiles for purposes of instruction, a variety of techniques were used, but these did not include standardized test scores. Through the use of semi-structured procedures student reading performance on textbook materials was evalu-

ated. These procedures included miscue analysis, free and cued retellings, and written recall. These were augmented by interviews regarding the strategies ordinarily used by students in reading unfamiliar material. This approach to assessment clearly is linked to the philosophic orientation of the program which considers "reading, writing, speaking and listening as inseparable components of language." (p. 1)

The program described by Heinrichs notwithstanding, most self-contained college reading programs do make extensive use of standardized test scores.

Reading Instruction Interwoven with Content Area Instruction

College reading instruction that is interwoven with instruction in content areas seems to make little use of standardized tests for assessment. Two programs will be cited as illustrative.

Moran (1980) describes an adjunct program at the University of California, Riverside in which reading/study skills instruction is coordinated with a particular content course. A reading specialist serves as an adjunct instructor in an entry level course, for example, sociology. The adjunct instructor attends the class sessions in the course, and, additionally, meets with the students as a group in separate sessions to assist them with reading and study skills. Moran describes the adjunct program in terms of what it is not, declaring that it is not tutoring in the content area, not individual study skills counseling, and that it is not remedial, i.e. it is not designed for students with serious deficiencies. The adjunct program is flexible and can be adjusted to meet the requests of students. However, there are certain "standard" topics, e.g. notetaking, reviewing for tests, taking tests.

Students apparently participate in the adjunct program on a voluntary basis or through instructor referral. There is no indication of the use of tests for screening or diagnosis.

Lukenbill (1972) described an experimental, interdisciplinary approach for high-risk freshmen at Miami-Dade Junior College in Florida. The staff of twenty, drawn from five disciplines (English, social science, natural science, psychology-counseling and reading) formed four interdisciplinary teams (I teams), each of which taught the same group of 110 to 125 students throughout the year. In this program the reading specialists functioned as consultants to the other team members, pointing out students' limitations in reading and the relevance of reading for their own courses. They conducted mini-lessons in reading for faculty members and identified reading materials that fitted topically into the students' curriculum and that could also be used as effective exercises for attaining behavioral objectives in reading.

In the program described by Lukenbill, standardized tests were used for screening in the selection of students. That is, the students in the program were randomly selected from among students who applied to the college and who scored below the 25th percentile on the Florida 12th Grade Placement Test and had an aptitude score below the cutoff of college acceptance. Beyond this there was no standardized testing for diagnostic purposes.

In summary, what we have attempted to explore in this paper is the relationship between the orientation and objectives of college reading programs and the methods used to assess the instructional needs of students. It seems clear that college reading programs generally have

relied heavily upon standardized tests for student assessment, but there are notable exceptions. These exceptions reflect theoretical-philosophical orientations which require a more incisive and holistic view of the reader than standardized tests currently provide.

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